CALIFORNIA WILDLIFE HABITAT RELATIONSHIPS SYSTEM
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B519 Red-winged Blackbird Agelaius phoeniceus
Family: Icteridae Order: Passeriformes Class: Aves

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common to abundant resident of wetland habitats throughout most of California. Nests and roosts in fresh and saline emergent wetlands of cattails and tules, or in moist, open habitats with thickets of sedges, willows, dense forbs, grasses. Most foraging takes place in cropland, grassland, and wet meadow habitats. Breeds only very locally above 1800 m (6000 ft) in Sierra Nevada (Verner and Boss 1980) and elsewhere in northern California. Mostly withdraws from montane areas in winter, especially in northern California (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Dominant foods are seeds and cultivated grains such as rice, oats, and corn; plant materials make up about 90% of the diet in fall and winter (Bent 1958, Martin et al. 1961, Crase and DeHaven 1978). Insects and spiders are important in breeding season, composing entire diet of nestlings and much of diet of adults in some areas (Bird and Smith 1964, Orians and Horn 1969). In Sacramento Valley, however, peak consumption of insects by adults was only 17% in spring (Crase and DeHaven 1978). Feeds in wetlands and other moist, open habitats; gleans food from ground, from emergent herbaceous vegetation, and less often from shrubs and trees. Often turns over stones, litter, dung; occasionally flycatches.

Cover: In California, typically roosts in fresh or brackish emergent wetlands; also uses trees, shrubs, other low, dense vegetation, usually in moist open habitats. Roost-site usually over water; may be occupied by many thousands in winter (Orians 1961).

Reproduction: Usually nests over or near water in dense emergent wetland of cattails, tules, sedges, or in moist habitat in thickets of willows, blackberries, dense herbage. Occasionally nests in tall trees. Nest usually 0.15 to 1.8 m (0.5 to 6 ft) above water or ground (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Occasionally nests as far as 4.8 km (3 mi) from water (Miller 1968).

Water: Nest usually built over or near water. Bathes regularly (Orians 1961), and drinks water (Nero 1956). Water probably required, at least when eating mostly seeds.

Pattern: Nests and roosts near or over water, usualIy in emergent wetland; forages mostly in open fields, often at considerable distance from nest (Grinnell and Miller 1944), and up to 80 km (50 mi) from winter roost (Meanley 1965).

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Not migratory in most of California, but flocks (usually unisexual) often undergo local, nomadic movements in nonbreeding season. In winter, breeding populations largely withdraw from montane areas, especially in northern California. Migrants from northernmost California, and farther north, augment winter populations of Central Valley and other lowland areas.

Home Range: In Arkansas and Texas, individuals foraged up to 80 km (50 mi) from winter roost (Meanley 1965). In central California, individuals foraged 32 km (20 mi), or more, from winter roost (Orians 1961).

Territory: In northern California, 21 territories in isolated cattail clumps surrounded by grassland averaged 0.02 ha (0.06 ac); 22 territories in an extensive wetland averaged 0.1 ha (0.24 ac); and 16 territories in a wetland strip along a reservoir averaged 0.1 ha (0.24 ac) (Orians 1961). In New York, 49 territories in upland habitat averaged 0.22 ha (0.54 ac), and 51 territories in a wetland averaged 0.07 ha (0.17 ac) (Case and Hewitt 1963). Territory averaged 0.03 ha (0.08 ac) in a Wisconsin marsh (Nero 1956). In emergent vegetation along lakes in eastern Washington, territory averaged 0.02 to 0.07 ha (0.05 to 0.17 ac) in different habitats (Holm 1973).

Reproduction: Breeding season lasts from early March into late July. Polygynous; each male may have several mates nesting in his territory. Sometimes nests solitarily but are more often semicolonial. Clutch size usually 3 or 4 eggs, range 2-6 (Orians 1961), may raise 2 or 3 broods yearly. Incubation lasts 10-12 days, altricial young tended by female alone or by both parents (Harrison 1978). Young leave nest at about 11-14 days, but do not become independent for 2 more wk (Payne 1969). Probably breeds first at 1 yr.

Niche: Often excluded from richer, deepwater emergent wetlands by yellow-headed blackbird (Miller 1968). Total nest predation decreases as water depth increases, but predation rate in uplands about same as in wetlands (Shipley 1979). Nest predators include raccoons, skunks, minks, grackles, snakes, other small mammals. Locally may be a fairly common host to brown-headed cowbird, but in many nesting colonies brood parasitism is rare because redwings drive away cowbirds (Friedmann 1963). Also aggressively drives away raptors and corvids from nesting territory (Terres 1980).

Comments: Although occasionally causes minor economic losses by consuming grains and other crops, primarily consumes waste grain in California (Clark 1975). May cause more extensive crop losses in southeastern U.S. (Dolbeer et al. 1978). One of the most numerous land birds in North America (Ehrlich et al. 1988). May form enormous winter flocks with other blackbirds, starlings, cowbirds, grackles.

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